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“All that inner space one never sees”

Beckett's Inhuman Domain

Ulrika Maude

University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

ulrika.maude@bristol.ac.uk

Abstract

Beckett's prose, drama, correspondence and working notes contain numerous references to processes that pertain to unconscious, involuntary bodily functionality and materiality. In this respect, the body's viscera and their processes cannot properly be said to belong to the subject, and yet everything over which we have agential control is premised on these deeper vegetative or physiological processes; thought and feeling, as Molloy puts it, 'dance their sabbath' in the 'caverns' of the body. If the conception of the 'human' is premised on rationality, then the viscera are non-human, object-like. Beckett's anti-rationalist emphasis on affective, visceral experience in *How It Is* (along with the novel's veiled allusions to Pavlov's conditioning and Watson's behaviourism) operates in tension with the more elevated intertextual references that signpost the humanist tradition.

Résumé

La prose, le théâtre, la correspondance et les notes de travail de Beckett contiennent plusieurs références aux fonctions physiologiques inconscientes du corps et à la matérialité. Les viscères et leurs processus n'appartiennent pas au sujet, mais tout ce que la conscience peut contrôler s'appuie sur ces processus végétatifs et physiologiques du corps; la pensée et l'émotion ont leurs origines dans les organes du corps et leur fonctionnement. Si le concept de "l'humain" implique la rationalité, alors les viscères sont "non humains," objectaux. L'accent porté par Beckett sur l'expérience viscérale, sur les affects dans son roman, *Comment c'est* (ainsi que les allusions voilées au conditionnement de Pavlov et au behaviorisme de Watson) entre en tension avec les références intertextuelles plus nobles de la tradition humaniste.

Keywords

affect – behaviourism – reflexes – viscera – *How It Is*

Much has been written in recent years about the representation of the sensorimotor body in Beckett's work, but what of the un-sensed body? What should one make of the fact that the non-visible body, the viscera—"the soft contents of the principle cavities of the body" (*OED*), including the heart, brain, bowels, lungs, as well as the nervous, endocrine and blood systems—so strikingly command Samuel Beckett's attention? Molloy, for instance, muses on "the within, all that inner space one never sees, the brain and heart and other caverns where thought and feeling dance their sabbath" (2009b, 6). Interiority is not conceived here in its traditional novelistic sense as a spiritual or mental essence, identity or selfhood; rather, what is foregrounded is the starkly embodied quality of "the within," an "inner space" in which thought and feeling are constituted by a specific and tangible but nonetheless unseen and often unfelt materiality. Similarly, Beckett's prose writings and drama, as well as his correspondence and working notes, contain numerous references to such processes as breathing, foetal life, birth, sleep, defecation and death—processes that pertain not to an agential or intentional subject, but to an unconscious and involuntary bodily functionality and materiality.

Much of Beckett's acute interest in viscera and in involuntary bodily events predates and anticipates key philosophical considerations of the interior of the body in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In the first and to date most influential philosophical analysis of embodiment, *Phenomenology of Perception*, published in French in 1945, Merleau-Ponty focused on the senses and on what, since the early nineteenth-century, scientists have called "motility." The term includes the kinds of movements that are not perceived by the subject, including non-intentional muscular or cellular kinesis, but it is fair to say that Merleau-Ponty's main interest in the book is primarily in conscious, agential manifestations of movement and embodiment. Nevertheless, in *The Visible and the Invisible*—a final work that was left unfinished at his untimely death in 1961—Merleau-Ponty began to investigate and to address the unseen body.

In *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964), Merleau-Ponty argues that the body is experienced as both subject and object, a "phenomenal body and an objective body," a seer and itself visible, "a sensible sentient", but also a body whose phenomenal field is perpetually provisional: 'behind, or after, or between the aspects we see of it' (136). Lodged between the "sensible" and the "sentient" there is, Merleau-Ponty argues, an absence, an "abyss" (136). He makes men-

tion of the inside of the body, "‘shadows stuffed with organs’" that belong to the visible world (138), and yet, the organs and the processes they perform are largely concealed from the experiencing subject. It is this bodily absence, an exploration left unfinished at Merleau-Ponty's death, that Drew Leder sets out to explore in his influential book, *The Absent Body* (1990). As he argues, the internal organs cannot be seen by the one who bears them and—unlike the surface of the body—they have few "sensory receptors," such that they can barely if at all be felt, rendering them near-imperceptible (Leder, 37–43). The brain, for instance, has no sensory receptors, and the common experience of a headache does not originate in the organ itself but in its surrounding tissue. Feelings we intermittently experience from other internal organs such as the stomach and the gut have, in turn, a markedly decreased qualitative range, mostly manifesting only crudely as discomfort, pain or fullness, while sensations of comfort and pleasure are missing (Leder, 40). These crude sensations nonetheless have a heightened "affective call" on the subject, which is characterised by compulsion: they command the subject's focus, attention and action in a manner that is rare for agential events (Leder, 73). Even these acute instances, however, are characterised by "spatial ambiguity," for the paucity of sensory receptors inside the body renders it difficult accurately to locate the origin of internal pain (Leder, 41). And what Drew Leder terms the "motor responses" of viscera are highly specialised, reduced in range, mostly undetectable, and, as automatic or "self-moving," they are devoid of subjective intention (46–48). And yet, the internal organs and their processes function as "the unknown motivators" of cognitive processes, of affect and action (Leder, 37), as Beckett seems to suggest in *Molloy* when he writes of "the brain and heart and other caverns where thought and feeling dance their sabbath" (2009b, 6). The reference to the puritan injunction on dancing on the holy day of rest—with its connotation indeed of the 'witches' sabbath'—seems to suggest that thought and feeling are shaped and even generated inside the body in *uncontrollable* and *unpredictable* ways that escape order, reason, and intention.¹ In this context, the etymology of the adjective 'visceral' is revealing: the sixteenth-century understanding of the word was "Affecting the viscera or bowels regarded as the seat of emotion; pertaining to, or touching deeply, inward feelings." (*OED*) Although this usage became obsolete in the seventeenth century, it was revived in the twentieth, possibly because medical discoveries in areas such as endocrinology made this usage no longer appear figurative to the modern understanding.

1 See *OED*, 'Sabbath', n., 3: 'A midnight meeting of demons, sorcerers and witches, presided over by the Devil, supposed in mediæval times to have been held annually as an orgy or festival. Often more explicitly *witches' sabbath*.'

Philosophers such as Drew Leder and Paul Ricoeur have expanded on Merleau-Ponty's unfinished work in *The Visible and the Invisible*, but some of these ideas can also be detected, a hundred years earlier, in the writings of the philosopher Henri Bergson, who is preoccupied in a number of his works with what he called "the deep-seated recalcitrance of matter" (Bergson, 26). For, as Leder has argued, internal corporeal functions "disappear not only from [...] perception" but also from the "structure of will and action" (Leder, 45). As such, organs that cannot directly be sensed, or that are only sensed intermittently, retain for the subject the quality of an object. Virginia Woolf recognises this phenomenon in a letter of December 1932 to Ethel Smyth, in which she muses: "My own brain is to me the most unaccountable of machinery—always buzzing, humming, soaring roaring diving, and then buried in mud" (140). Forty years later, Mouth, the protagonist of Beckett's play, *Not I* (1972), helplessly observes "the buzzing? ... yes ... all the time the buzzing ... dull roar like falls ... in the skull" (2009d, 92). If the working brain is sensed at all, in other words, it is frequently as an inchoate, senseless, and unpredictably intermittent noise.

Beckett's early interest in the work of the Swiss poet and philosopher, Henri-Frédéric Amiel (1821–1881), may well have informed his engagement with tangible, material interiority rather than spiritual essence. In his "Dream Notebook," which dates from the early 1930s, Beckett refers to Amiel's encyclopaedic method of writing: "plung[e] à la Amiel into the Encyclopaedia of my subject" (1999, 132). Amiel also appears in Beckett's review of Thomas McGreevy's poetry, published in the *Dublin Magazine* in 1934, where he refers to "the intelligent Amiel" (1983, 69). It is significant, therefore, that in his *Journal Intime* (published in English translation in 1921), in an entry from August 1862, Amiel comments on the "wise part of us" being "unconscious of itself":

Life, which seeks its own continuance, tends to repair itself without our help. It mends its spiders' webs when they have been torn; it reestablishes in us the conditions of health, and itself heals the injuries inflicted upon it [...] The wise part of us, then, is that which is unconscious of itself; and what is most reasonable in man are those elements in him which do not reason. [...] The essential, maternal basis of our conscious life is therefore the unconscious life which we perceive no more than the outer hemisphere of the moon perceives the earth, while all the time indissolubly and eternally bound to it.

AMIEL, 86–87

Beckett's reference in his review of McGreevy's poetry to the "intelligent Amiel" for whom "there is only one landscape" (*Disjecta* 69), could therefore relate

precisely to Amiel's discussion of "[t]he wise part of us" and the "most reasonable in man," namely "those elements in him which do not reason" and which here functions as a subtle critique of what Beckett saw as McGreevy's overly-conceptual, religious poetry. This valorisation of the non-rational in poetry is echoed in Beckett's own, earlier letter to McGreevy, dated 18 October 1932, where he writes about "the integrity of a pendu's emission of semen, what I find in Homer & Dante & Racine & sometimes Rimbaud, the integrity of the eyelids coming down before the brain knows of grit in the wind" (2009e, 134–135). Beckett, in other words, is foregrounding automatic bodily events—here reflex actions—as markers of what he calls "integrity". The somatic concerns are metonymic of literary ones, for in the same letter Beckett complains that his own poetry is all "frigged up," and that it is "failing to say what I imagine I want to say," reducing the writing to a form of "stutter[ing]." It fails not in its "choice of terms," but because it is "*facultatif*": optional, like intentional actions, willed and deliberate rather than the result of a "spontaneous combustion" (2009e, 133, 134). The notion of 'integrity' also extends to the valorisation of Beckett's literary predecessors, "Homer & Dante & Racine & sometimes Rimbaud." Integrity, from the Latin *integritās*, meaning "wholeness, entireness, completeness, integrity, chastity, purity" (*OED*), both of material and moral quality, might strike one as an odd preoccupation for Beckett, whose writing seems to treat any conception of wholeness or purity with deep, unrelenting suspicion, depending as it does on a notion of self-identity that he sees as ineluctably unachievable, divided against itself. But 'integrity' also carries the sense of something 'unimpaired' or 'uncorrupted,' which may go some way towards clarifying his sense that the representation, or even performance, of non-intentional or not fully intentional actions contains an 'integrity' that conscious and volitional actions leave wanting.

From the 1930s, as Mark Nixon has argued, Beckett in fact explicitly associated his writing with 'bodily functions' and even with excretions (23). In a letter to McGreevy, he refers to work sent to the magazine *Experiment* as "three turds from my Central Lavatory" (Nixon, 23–24), and in a letter to Mary Manning Howe, from 1936, he alludes to his oeuvre as the "Beckett Bowel Books" (2009e, 383). By the time Beckett writes *How It Is*, this excremental logic has become all-pervasive: here, the narrator muses on "the need to move on the need to shit and vomit and the other great needs all my great categories of being" (9).

A similar preoccupation appears in Lucky's monologue in *Waiting for Godot*, which mentions "the strides of alimentation and defecation," as an allusion to the theories of early twentieth-century nutritionists who devoted keen attention to the form and consistency of faeces as signs and signals from—if not

the language itself of—the viscera (2010b, 40).² And it crops up regularly in other parts of Beckett's oeuvre. Malone reminds us that "What matters is to eat and excrete. Dish and pot, dish and pot, these are the poles" (2010a, 9), in a conception of human existence in which the in-between vanishes from view. The scatologically-named Krapp records onto his tapes memories of his "bowel condition" and his "iron stool," which are mirrored in his constipated literary production.³ Molloy describes his birth as the "First taste of the shit" (13), which renders his mother "Countess Caca," and we learn that he has now taken her place, for "I sleep in her bed. I piss and shit in her pot" (3). When asked by the policeman for his papers, Molloy offers him "bits of newspaper, to wipe myself, you understand, when I have a stool" (17), in an echo of the "Calypso" episode in Joyce's *Ulysses*, which similarly conflates writing or text with excrement. Bloom enters the outhouse and sits on "the cuckstool" to read a story from *Titbits* as he excretes:

Quietly he read, restraining himself, the first column and, yielding but resisting, began the second. Midway, his last resistance yielding, he allowed his bowels to ease themselves quietly as he read, reading still patiently that slight constipation of yesterday quite gone.

JOYCE, 66

Reading the columns of the newspaper is conflated with the act of excreting "columns" of faeces. His business completed, Bloom tears "away half the prize story sharply and wipe[s] himself with it" (67).

If Beckett likened his own writing to bodily secretions, something similar is at stake in the production of affects. Beckett's views on the integrity of Racine's writing (cited above) are worth elaborating on here. Rachel Burrows, who was Beckett's student at Trinity College, Dublin, argued that in his teaching, Beckett "loved finding little bits of what he called 'liminal consciousness' rather than the subconscious, within Racine" (Gontarski, 7). "Liminal" here refers to something barely perceptible, a visceral process rather than a subconscious one, that resides on the threshold of sensory perception. The notes on Beckett's lectures by Grace McKinley, another of his former students at Trinity College, Dublin contain the following observation: "For the first time in the Fr[ench] theatre we

2 These included Horace Fletcher (1849–1919), known as 'the great masticator,' who advocated a low-protein diet, and John Harvey Kellogg, whose theories were premised on the high consumption of fiber and who, with his brother, invented the corn flake.

3 See *OED*, 'Crap' (n. 1 and adj.), from the Anglo-Norman *chrape* for rubbish or waste, and Middle French *crape*, for filth and grime.

have no heroic love. Sexuality is represented at last, and treated realistically. None of the fine Cornelian phrases. The word hate is more frequent than love. We have the cruelty of sexuality stated" (qtd. in Knowlson and Knowlson, 307). It is perhaps precisely these internal processes—"thought and feeling danc[ing] their Sabbath" or what some critics have referred to as the atavistic, ancestral quality of Racine's otherwise "cerebral position" (Knowlson and Knowlson, 311)—that Beckett was referring to in his observation about Racine: "an interference at the heart of passion itself," as Shane Weller puts it (45).

The internal organs and processes of the body cannot, after all, properly be said to "belong to the subject"; rather, they are non-human in not fully pertaining to the will or to comprehension, as Drew Leder argues (65)—or as Paul Ricoeur puts it: 'life functions in me without me' (418). And yet, everything over which we have agential or intentional control is premised on "deeper vegetative" or physiological processes (Leder, 65). Beckett had come across this idea in 1934 in his reading of Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892; tr. 1895). Nordau himself was a physician by training, and in a chapter entitled "The Physiology of Ego-Mania" he writes that in the case of "degenerate" subjects, "the organic ego-sensibility, or conaesthesia," overshadows "in great part or wholly the perceptions of the external world in consciousness, which no longer takes notice of anything but the interior processes of the organism" (256). The emotional state that results, Nordau argues, is "the consequence of phenomena taking place in nerves, vessels and glands" (256). Consciousness, in the emotionally degenerate, he continues, is therefore, "imperiously monopolized by the somatic 'I,' which does not permit the mind to be occupied with anything but the painful or tumultuous processes taking place in the depths of the organs" (257). Beckett read this passage and made a note in his *Dream Notebook* of the "monopolising consciousness of degenerate subject distorting/excluding the Not-I" (1999, 97). As John Pilling observes, the origins of Beckett's play, *Not I* (1972), can be traced back to his reading of Nordau's book (Beckett, 1999, 97), and signs of this reading and understanding of subjectivity permeate most if not all of Beckett's work. As these examples suggest, the visceral can colour and saturate the environment under conditions such as fatigue, hunger, ill health or heightened emotional states, as Beckett had reason to know only too well.

Beckett's writing exhibits an acute interest in visceral organs and processes, then. The narrator of "The Calmative" (1946) is "too frightened this evening to listen to myself rot, waiting for the great red lapses of the heart, the tearings at the caecal walls, and for the slow killings to finish in my skull" (19).⁴ Similarly,

4 The caecal walls constitute part of the gut.

Malone, who finds it difficult to “guide” his arms, muses that “[p]erhaps the red nucleus has faded,” and comments on being “far from the sounds of blood and breath, immured,” dying “unbeknown to my stupid flesh” (2010a, 10). “Stupid” can here be understood as in-sensible, non-agential, and if the conception of ‘the human’ and ‘humanism’ are understood to be premised on the notion of rationality, then the viscera are non-human precisely because they are ‘stupid,’ stunned or benumbed, as the etymology of the word suggests—in other words, object-like, things rather than phenomena that we can experience as the subject or self.⁵ While this does not of course render Beckett a Cartesian writer, it may have contributed to the early Cartesian readings of his work. In Beckett’s writing (as in Darwin’s) after all, “thought and feeling” depend on, and even originate in, bodily organs and their functions.

Beckett was also vitally interested in the individual organs of the body, including especially its most complex and intricate configuration, the brain. He read Lawrence Shainberg’s book, *Brain Surgeon* (1979), and commented, in a letter to the author from July 1979, that the best chance for the writer is in old age, “Gaping into his synaptic chasms” (2016, 506). As we know from the discoveries made by Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon in *Samuel Beckett’s Library*, Beckett was a keen reader of reference books. His own copy of the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*—although gifted to him “too late,” in 1958, when his more youthful interest in its volumes had waned—was dog-eared at the entry on the “Brain” (Van Hulle and Nixon, 193). This interest in “all that inner space one never sees,” continued into his final years: in 1989, after his recurring falls, he recounted to James Knowlson, in considerable detail and as if in an attempt to perceive the inaccessible spaces of his own brain and body, his experience of the various neuro-physiological tests he had had, including “*encephalogram*,” which measures the electrical activity of the brain, “*electromyogram*,” which measures the electrical activity produced by the skeletal muscles, and finally “*posturographie*,” which quantifies postural control (Knowlson and Maude, 2012).

Molloy’s remark about the mystery of ‘thought and feeling danc[ing] their sabbath’ in the unsensed or near-unsensed viscera also brings to mind the work of the psychologist and pragmatist philosopher, William James, who makes an appearance in *Murphy* (1938), in Neary’s comment on the ‘big blooming buzzing confusion’ (2009f, 4), which James argued ‘assailed’ the infant through ‘eyes, ears, nose, skin, and entrails at once’ (James, 1890a, 488). In the second volume of *Principles of Psychology*, James contended that perception triggers a

5 ‘Stupid’ from the Latin *stupidus*, ‘dazed, numbed, stunned’ (*OED*, ‘stupid’, adj.).

reaction in "the skin, glands, heart, and other viscera" (1890b, 450) and that it is in fact these reactions that we properly call emotion. James writes:

Common-sense says, we lose our fortune, are sorry and weep; we meet a bear, are frightened and run; we are insulted by a rival, are angry and strike. The hypothesis here to be defended says that this order of sequence is incorrect, that the one mental state is not immediately induced by the other, that the bodily manifestations must first be interposed between, and that the more rational statement is that we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful, as the case may be. Without the bodily states following on the perception, the latter would be purely cognitive in form, pale, colourless, destitute of emotional warmth. We might then see the bear, and judge it best to run, receive the insult and deem it right to strike, but we should not actually *feel* afraid or angry.

JAMES, 1890b, 449–450

For James, in other words, perceptions trigger a visceral reaction in the perceiver, and this involuntary, embodied impulse only later translates into a cognitive realisation of grief, hatred, love, or anger. James corroborates his point by arguing that "[i]f we fancy some strong emotion, and then try to abstract from our consciousness of it all the feelings of its bodily symptoms, we find we have nothing left behind, no 'mind-stuff' out of which the emotion can be constituted" (451; emphasis in the original). James cites the Danish psychologist Carl Georg Lange (1834–1900) on "the physiognomy of grief":

The chief feature of grief is perhaps its paralyzing effect on the voluntary movements [...] a feeling of weariness; and (as in all weariness) movements made slowly, heavily without strength, unwillingly, and with exertion [...]. But this weakness of the entire voluntary motor apparatus (the so-called apparatus of "animal life") is only one side of the physiognomy of grief. Another side, hardly less important, and its consequences even more so, belongs to another subdivision of the motor apparatus, namely, the involuntary or 'organic' muscles, especially those which are found in the walls of the blood-vessels, and the use of which is, by contracting, to diminish the latter's calibre. These muscles, and their nerves, forming together the "vaso-motor apparatus," act in grief contrarily to the voluntary motor apparatus. Instead of being paralyzed, like the latter, the vascular muscles are more strongly contracted than usual, so that the tissues and organs of the body become anaemic. The immediate consequence of

this bloodlessness is pallor and shrunkenness, and the pale color and collapsed features are the peculiarities which, in connection with relaxation of the visage, give to the victim of grief his characteristic physiognomy, and often give an impression of emaciation which ensues too rapidly to be possibly due to real disturbance of nutrition, or waste uncompensated by repair.

LANGE qtd. in JAMES, 1890b, 443–444

In this way, the imperceptible and undetectable within the embodied self or the self-as-body is indirectly brought to visibility and to sensibility. The involuntary functioning of the viscera sets the conditions and boundaries for volitional actions. Lange and, by proxy, James argue that emotion is a sum of physiological processes which produce in the subject different effects, and that it is the sum of these effects that translates into what they call emotion and what we might call affect. In these emotions, the subject is not in control of itself; rather, “The elements are all organic changes, and each of them is the reflex effect of the exciting object [of perception]” (1890b, 453). As in other reflex actions, in other words, a stimulus from the outside triggers an involuntary response, which in turn has effects that translate into a variety of emotions. In this way, the subject is not in control of its affective responses. Instead, the object of perception generates an affect, a possession, which in turn is processed into a conceptualisation. The involuntary visceral event, triggered by the perception, remains primary for James, while the cognitive response has a temporally secondary status in the perceiving subject’s experience.

Paul Ricoeur takes a more nuanced stance on “affective intentionality,” which for him entails what one might call an affective loop (271). The object that triggers the physiological reaction—“a mosaic of secretions, contractions, etc., which recur in each emotion with only quantitative variations”—and which “explodes in disturbance and disordered gestures,” requires a representation or conceptualisation for “intelligible emotion” to take place (270–272). Here, the spontaneity of the involuntary reaction results in “a circular or reciprocal understanding between intellectual and affective evaluation and bodily spontaneity” (272).

Beckett’s “Philosophy Notes” make brief references to various theories of emotion, including those of the Cynics, for whom “happiness” is generated through virtue. Beckett also speculates in his notes that the term, “cynicism,” may have derived from the word, “*Kynos*,” for dog (or dog-like), which was also the Cynics’ emblem (TCD MS 10967/66r; Beckett, 2020, 105). In Stoicism, in turn, feelings were deemed “aberrations” (TCD MS 10967/114r; Beckett, 2020, 186). But Beckett also came across the question of affect in his reading of

Spinoza, whose philosophy he first encountered in the early 1930s through Wilhelm Windelband's *A History of Philosophy* (1910), graduating later, in 1936, to reading Spinoza's *Ethics* in the original Latin and in French, as he notes in a letter to Thomas McGreevy of 19 September 1936 (2009e, 370).⁶ Spinoza's theory of affect is succinctly summarised by Anthony Uhlmann:

In Part 3 of Spinoza's *Ethics* an affect is defined as 'the affections of the Body by which the Body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections' (Spinoza 1985: 493). In Part 2 of the *Ethics*, these affections are understood to involve our Body's perceptions of the contact it undergoes with other bodies (as for example when light strikes our eyes, a sound strikes our ear drums, something touches us, or when an image of another body occurs to us). An affect, then, is brought about through a causal chain.

UHLMANN, 61

Uhlmann elaborates the point by saying that in Spinoza, the laws of nature and of causation are all-encompassing, including "the human mind and what it thinks, and the human body and what it feels" (Uhlmann, 61). While Merleau-Ponty made explicit the need to part company with the humanism, naturalism and theology that Spinoza's work represents, he nevertheless shares Spinoza's sense of a situated subject.⁷

1 "an odd tear inward": *How It Is*

The work that perhaps most insistently and persistently returns to the viscera in Beckett's writing is *How It Is* (1961/1964). Édouard Magessa O'Reilly has observed that there is a continuation in the novel of themes that are prominent in the Trilogy, and that Beckett even briefly considered making this explicit, adding a marginal note to the typescript linking the narrator of *How It Is* to Molloy and Malone (vii). Among the visceral organs that feature in *How It Is* are the kidney, the heart, the brain, the eye, the ear, the navel, the bladder, the urethra, the rectum, the anus, the skin, blood, arse, testicle, genitals, "glans" [sic] (54),

6 See Matthew Feldman, *Beckett's Books: A Cultural History of Beckett's Interwar Notes*, pp. 50–52.

7 Two months before his death, Merleau-Ponty made the following working note: 'Precisely what has to be done is to show that philosophy can no longer think according to this cleavage: God, man, creatures—which was Spinoza's division' (Merleau-Ponty, 274).

and pores.⁸ Mingled with the heavy and at times elevated intertextual references in the novel (recently masterfully explored by Anthony Cordingley), is an extraordinary anatomical precision in which an array of body parts are singled out: the clavicle, the skull, the right index, nail, broken column, knees, shoulders, neck, heels, crown or vertex—by which the narrator refers to the cranial vertex, an anatomical region of the head—the hands, the *thenar*—a group of muscles below the thumb on the palm of the hand—forelegs, the armpit, arms, and the *humerus*—the long bone of the arm between the shoulder and elbow. Further anatomical regions foregrounded in the novel include the tongue, the mouth, the nostrils, “dimple malar,”—which in its adjectival form refers to anything “of the cheek, belonging to the cheek,” while “malar” as a noun refers to the bone that forms the prominent part of the cheek and outer socket (47). “Buccinators,” which feature in Part 2 of the novel, are the muscles underlying the cheeks (47). The references to anatomical regions of the face along with repeated allusions to “brief movements of the lower face” (20) evoke the physiology of speech, for each of these body parts plays a role in speech-production, while the physiological emphasis on the region of the mouth brings to mind *Not I* and Beckett’s comment to Alan Schneider in a letter of October 1972 that speech in the play is “a purely buccal phenomenon without mental control or understanding, only half heard. Function running away with organ” (Harmon, 283). *How It Is*, indeed, frequently insists on representing what is considered intentional action—here speech—as involuntary, non-agential: “a fart fraught with meaning issuing through the mouth” (20).

There is, furthermore, extraordinary attention in *How It Is* to involuntary, reflexive or visceral embodied processes: breathing, panting, birth, death, hunger, thirst, smell, sleep, defecation, copulation and other such events. The novel also makes frequent reference to visceral secretions—“tears,” “vomit,” “piss” and “shit”—which the mud itself resembles (16, 26, 30). The laws of physics are evoked in the novel, such that “capillarity” (56), for example, is represented as analogous to automatic visceral reactions, emphasising the affinity of the narrator with his environs—with what O’Reilly has termed the “primaeval mud,” or with what the narrator himself describes as “nothing more than all our shit [...] billions of us crawling and shitting in their shit” (44). These visceral processes and phenomena are accompanied by affects: indifference, “love”—the word is repeated at least sixteen times in the text—and dejection: “the heart bleeds you lose your heart drop by drop weep even an odd tear inward” (17). Tears, which also feature prominently in *The Unnamable*, are one of the “spe-

8 The skin constitutes what is called “the visceral layer.”

cial expressions of man," as Darwin put it (146), but "tear" is also the homograph of another noun, a "tear" as in a "rupture," which further adds to the materiality and viscosity of the line that conflates emotional and physiological pain, the heart bleeding 'drop by drop' an odd tear [tiə(r)] or tear [tɛə(r)] inward.

Part 1 of *How It Is* draws an analogy between the narrator and a dog: "the cord round my neck the sack in my mouth a dog" (39), an animal that is frequently deemed highly affective. Part 2 of the novel witnesses the appearance of a "spinal dog" (74) which, as Beckett stated in a letter of March 1963 to the Swedish translator of his work, C.G. Bjurström, "is not a breed of dog, but a laboratory dog whose brain and nervous system are mutilated for experimental purposes of the Pavlovian kind" (2014, 533). As is well known, Ivan Pavlov (1899–1936) was a brain physiologist whose work focused on conditioning and on involuntary reflexes, signalling the arrival of food to his dogs by using bells, tuning forks, metronomes and electric shocks, until these triggered a salivary gland reflex in the animals. This reflex was measured by modifying or, better, mutilating the dogs' salivary glands and collecting the secretions into a specially constructed container attached to the gland for the purpose of the experiment. Beckett makes several references to Pavlov's dogs in essays, poems and correspondence even before he had read Woodworth's *Contemporary Schools of Psychology* in the 1930s.⁹ The references are often humorous and even disparaging, but they do clearly show how the findings of the eminent Russian brain physiologist captured Beckett's imagination. Beckett's "Psychology Notes" on "Russian Objectivism," furthermore, contain entries on both Pavlov's and Bechterev's experiments on the "Conditioned Reflex": "All behaviour sensorimotor, consisting of stimulus-response units, each of which began with stimulus to a sense organ & terminate in muscular or glandular response. Behaviour might be overt or implicit" (TCD MS 10971/7/8r, qtd. in Maude 2013, 86).

Beckett, in other words, was interested in the visceral character of conditioning, and it is therefore significant that 'training' features prominently in Part 2 of *How It Is*, such as the remark on "problem of training and concurrently little by little solution and application of same" (49). Various lessons follow: "First lesson theme song I dig my nails into his armpit right hand right pit he cries I withdraw them thump with fist on skull his face sinks in the mud his cries cease end of first lesson" (54). The brutality of Pavlov's experiments is here brought to the fore, and the sadomasochistic overtones of Part 2 also thematise the "cruelty of sexuality" to which Beckett referred in his lectures

9 For Beckett's interest in Pavlov and reflexes, see Maude, 'Pavlov's Dogs and Other Animals in Samuel Beckett' and Maude, "Que voulez-vous: Beckett, Nerve Theory and Literary Form."

on Racine (Knowlson and Knowlson, 307). The torturous lessons to which Pim is subjected appear to be designed to elicit visceral, involuntary responses, in the manner of the experiments on “Pavlov’s unfortunate dogs,” as Beckett had referred to them in ‘Dante ... Bruno . Vico .. Joyce’ (1929) (1983, 26). Pavlov’s work instigated in John B. Watson, the founder of Behaviourism, the belief that all behaviour is acquired through conditioning and conditioned learning, to which the narrator’s many “lessons” in *How It Is* seem to allude, for Behaviourism and Watson’s method also make an appearance in the “Psychology Notes” of the 1930s. Beckett observes in the notes that for Watson, the notion of consciousness was as intangible as the concept of the soul, which he rejected in favour of the biological (as opposed to introspective) methods of Behaviourism (TCD MS 10971/7/8r). As Beckett knew from his reading of Woodworth’s *Contemporary Schools of Psychology* (1931), Watson had experience of and admiration for animal psychology, which provided the model for Behaviourism (Woodworth, 59; Beckett, TCD MS 10971/7/8r). Woodworth also highlights Watson’s acknowledgement of not merely “explicit” but “implicit” behaviour, such as “visceral behaviour” that remained “hidden in the interior” (59), and Beckett’s ‘Psychology Notes’ indeed record that “Emotion is changes in visceral & glandular systems” (TCD MS 10971/7r qtd. in Maude 2013, 87). Even thinking, Woodworth adds, is for Watson a form of “implicit” behaviour, because it was premised on what he called “inner speech,” which he argued consisted of the near-imperceptible movement of the subject’s vocal chords (Woodworth 61; Beckett, TCD MS 10971/7/9r).

In Part 2 of *How It Is*, responses are generated in somatic terms, following a “table of basic stimuli” (59) that resemble acts of torture: “nails in armpit” (54), “clawing his left hand to the bone” (56), can opener “between the cheeks of his arse” (57). As Joshua Powell has argued, Beckett appears to be drawing an analogy in the novel between methods of torture and “psychological experimentation” (163). As well as recalling the muddy, often slimy trenches of the two world wars, aspects of *How It Is* bring to mind laboratory conditions, for there is a bracketing or reduction of sensory perception in the mud, where olfactory, gustatory and visual perceptions are severely limited if not stunted, and where touch—or its extreme form, pain—constitutes the principal focus of training or conditioning. In this sense, Beckett’s mud-crawlers resemble both Pavlov and his dogs, experimenter and subject, perpetrator and the recipient of extraordinary acts of cruelty. This perhaps anticipates Beckett’s final, torture-themed play *What Where* (1983), in which each of the players is both torturer and tortured in turn, and where Bim’s name is a near-homonym of Pim.

Beckett’s often extreme representations of affective processes in *How It Is* could perhaps be understood in terms of Spinoza’s claim that any knowledge

we have of the outside world consists only of "a knowledge of ourselves, and of how we have been affected" by it, but which therefore fails to provide "a clear idea of the thing we perceive" (Uhlmann, 62). And yet, as Anthony Uhlmann points out, we might see this rather differently and say that in so much as we understand ourselves, we do so "through the contact we make with other bodies" such that "Our very thought [...] is determined from the outside" (Uhlmann, 62). It is perhaps this anti-rationalist emphasis on affective, visceral experience in *How It Is* that explains the novel's frequent allusions to "loss of species" (21). In Part 1, the narrator's reference to "hanging on by the fingernails to one's species" (20) along with veiled allusions to the work of Pavlov, Bechterev, and Watson in the novel seem to operate in tension with the more elevated inter-textual references that signpost the humanist tradition, representing instead forms of existence that bear a closer resemblance to the non-human animal. Molloy's formulation of "the brain and heart and other caverns where thought and feeling dance their sabbath" (6) points to a creature whose subjectivity appears in a much starker, minimally-agential hue, to a creature that has shed almost all vestiges and signs of its humanising qualities.

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